

Fact Sheet

Measles

What causes measles?

Measles is caused by a virus.

How does measles spread?

Measles is spread through the air by infectious droplets and is highly contagious.

How long does it take to show signs of measles after being exposed?

It takes an average of 10-12 days from exposure to the first symptom, which is usually fever. The measles rash doesn't usually appear until approximately 14 days after exposure, 2-3 days after the fever begins.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Symptoms include fever, runny nose, cough, loss of appetite, "pink eye," and a rash. The rash usually lasts 5-6 days and begins at the hairline, moves to the face and upper neck, and proceeds down the body.

How serious is measles?

Measles can be a serious disease, with 30% of reported cases experiencing one or more complications. Death from measles occurs in approximately 1-2 per 1,000 reported cases in the United States. Complications from measles are more common among very young children (younger than five years of age) and adults (older than 20 years of age).

What are possible complications from measles?

Diarrhea is the most common complication of measles, especially in young children. Ear infections occur in 7% of reported cases. Pneumonia, occurring in 6% of reported cases, accounts for 60% of measles-related deaths. Approximately one out of a thousand cases will develop acute encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain. This serious complication can lead to permanent brain damage.

Measles during pregnancy increases the risk of premature labor, miscarriage, and low-birth-weight infants, although birth defects have not been linked to measles exposure.

Measles can be especially severe in persons with compromised immune systems.

How do I know if my child has measles?

Measles is diagnosed by a combination of the patient's symptoms and by laboratory tests.

Is there a treatment for measles?

There is no specific treatment for measles. People with measles need bed rest, fluids, and control of fever. Patients with complications may need treatment specific to their problem.

How long is a person with measles contagious?

Measles is highly contagious and can be transmitted from four days before the rash becomes visible to four days after the rash appears.

If I think my child has been exposed to measles, what should I do?

You should contact your doctor immediately if you believe you or your child has been exposed to measles. If your child has not been vaccinated, measles vaccine may prevent disease if given within 72 hours of exposure. Immune globulin (a blood product containing antibodies to the measles virus) may prevent or lessen the severity of measles if given within six days of exposure.

How common is measles in the United States?

Before the vaccine was licensed in 1963, there were an estimated 3-4 million cases each year. In the years following 1963, the number of measles cases dropped dramatically, with only 1,497 cases in 1983, the lowest annual total reported up to that time.

A measles epidemic occurred in the U.S. from large outbreaks in many cities. From 1989 to 1991, 55,622 cases were reported with a total of 123 measles-associated deaths. Half of the cases and deaths were in children younger than five years of age. The most important cause of this epidemic was low vaccination rates among preschool-age children.

Due to extensive vaccination efforts, the number of reported measles cases fell during the 1990s. Only 44 cases were reported in 2002. However, measles is still common in many other countries in the world and can easily be imported, so continued vaccination against the disease is still important.

Can you get measles more than once?

No.

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This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.

Connecticut Department of Public Health
410 Capitol Avenue
P.O. Box 340308
Hartford, CT 06134-0308
Phone: (860) 509-7929
FAX: (860) 509-7945
www.state.ct.us/dph